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Census of Population and Housing

Labour Statistics: Concepts, Sources and Methods

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The Census of Population and Housing is conducted every five years to measure the number of people in Australia on Census night, their key characteristics and the households and dwellings in which they live. By collecting lots of information in a standardised way, from the country as a whole, the Census provides a rich and detailed snapshot of Australia.

Australia's seventeenth (and most recent) national Census was conducted on 10 August 2021.

The Census and the Labour Force Survey (LFS) both measure information about the labour market activity of persons aged 15 years and over. While both collections measure the same concepts surrounding the labour force in Australia, there are a number of differences between the two that should be considered when comparing the data, as statistics produced from these collections are not the same.

Labour-related topics on the 2016 Census include: labour force status, status in employment, employment type, occupation, industry of employment, hours worked, place of work and method of travel to work. For unemployed persons, information is collected on whether looking for full-time or part-time work.

Purpose of Census and the Labour Force Survey

The Census provides a rich snapshot of all people living in the country on Census night. It is the leading source of information for small population groups and areas, and allows for the analysis of labour market activities and industry and occupation data at a more detailed level. The Census also collects information about a range of characteristics of people, including, but not limited to, their labour force status, enabling analyses across a broader range of socioeconomic dimensions.

However, the Labour Force Survey produces the most authoritative and recent estimates of labour market information, including employment and unemployment. Labour force statistics are published monthly by the ABS in Labour Force, Australia (cat no. 6202.0). The Labour Force Survey is designed specifically to measure changes over time in the Australian labour force, and to provide a high quality measure for use in international comparisons. It provides a highly accurate estimate of key labour force statistics of the Australian economy, including employment, unemployment and underemployment, as well as a range of more detailed labour market-specific data. The Labour Force Survey is the leading source of data for monitoring Australia's labour market conditions.

Understanding differences between the LFS and Census

Scope and coverage

The Census includes everyone who is in Australia on Census night, regardless of age, with the exception of foreign diplomats and their families. Visitors to Australia are counted regardless of how long they have been in the country, or how long they plan to stay. Persons present in Australian offshore territories (Jarvis Bay, Christmas Island and Cocos

Keeling Islands and Norfolk Island) are included in the Census. Thus, babies and children under the age of 15, Australian defence force members, tourists, students, working holiday makers and other temporary residents are counted in the Census. However, the Census excludes Australian residents who are out of the country on Census night.

In contrast, the scope of the LFS is limited to all persons aged 15 years and over, excluding members of the permanent defence forces, certain diplomatic personnel of overseas governments, overseas residents in Australia, short term visitors, short term students and members of non-Australian defence forces (and their dependants) stationed in Australia. However, the LFS includes resident who are temporarily overseas for less than 6 weeks.

Collection methodology

The greatest difference in collection methodology between the Census and the Labour Force Survey is the questionnaires that are used. The Census questionnaire covers a broad range of topics across a range of social and economic domains, while the Labour Force Survey is specifically designed to produce labour statistics.

In addition to having a greater multi-topic focus to its design, the Census must also necessarily use as few questions as possible for each individual topic, to a much greater extent than is the case with the Labour Force Survey and other household surveys. For example, the data item 'Labour Force Status' is derived in the Census based on only four questions, while the Labour Force Survey questionnaire includes an extensive range of questions to measure Labour Force Status with a much greater level of precision. In particular, the Census count of unemployed people is higher than the corresponding Labour Force estimate, given it is not possible to measure the distinction between someone who is unemployed and not in the labour force with the same level of precision.

Lastly, the Census, by necessity, given its size, involves all households self-completing online or paper questionnaires. In contrast, the Labour Force Survey is able to offer a mixture of modes to respondents, including interviews by highly trained interviewers (either over the telephone or face-to-face) or self-completion online questionnaires, according to their preference, to elicit the most precise responses to the detailed questions that are asked.

Treatment of non-response

To account for unreturned Census forms, demographic characteristics of persons in non-responding households are either imputed or included in the 'not stated' category. However, Labour Force Status is not imputed and data are not adjusted for non-responding households.

Issues with response or coverage in the Census are identified through the Post Enumeration

Survey, which is conducted a few weeks after the Census to estimate the number and characteristics of people either not counted or counted multiple times on Census night.

In contrast, only fully responding households contribute to Labour Force Survey estimates. Non-responding households are treated as 'not stated' and excluded and adjusted for through the weighting process. As a sample survey, it is then weighted to an independent population benchmark based on the Estimated Resident Population (ERP), which ensures estimates add up to an independently estimated distribution of the usual resident civilian population aged 15 years and over, regardless of any sample lost due to non-response.